

CHURCH MISSION, RELIGIONS, AND CULTURES IN DIALOGUE

In his encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (n. 55), St. John Paul II wrote, “Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions. In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain ‘gaps, insufficiencies and errors.’ All of this has been given ample emphasis by the Council and the subsequent Magisterium, without detracting in any way from the fact that *salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization.*”

The Pope continued, “In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable.”

Mission and dialogue each include respect for the other, founded on the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, recognizing and promoting

religious freedom and commitment to the missionary imperative. Both affirm the need never to impose anything on anyone, but also the necessity of proposing Christ, faith in Christ, and Christian belonging to his Church. There are at least two distinct entities in dialogue and mission, as well as a series of positive and fruitful tensions. There are not only dualities or dialectics, but also dimensions that act in different directions and which are motivated by different cultural and religious elements. For simplicity, practicality, and clarity, it is often useful to consider these elements in pairs, but they are more than dialectical forces between two poles; all the various dimensions contribute to define the overall result, each with its weight and its direction. The existence of multiple dimensions confirms the complexity of the one reality of mission (see *Redemptoris Missio*, 41).

Mission and dialogue take place at the meeting point of the community of faith with all that constitutes the context in which the Christian community lives and works. The whole Christian mission is realized in the relationship between the Church and the world, and people in the world. Both the deposit of faith received from the Church (Holy Scriptures, sacraments, and charity) and the cultures, languages, and situations in which and to which that Tradition is communicated are involved. All faith and theology are contextual; the socio-cultural horizon is an essential factor for mission. Mission takes place entirely within specific settings, and all missionary theologies must stand in an open and critical relationship with local cultures and religions. It is only through dialogue that Christians can understand others and their cultural and religious expressions that God calls us to love and to evangelize. By committing ourselves to dialogue with these realities, we can understand in our time and in the different scenarios of our world the constants of God's love for the salvation of all.

In the Western vision of the world, culture and religion are usually considered as separate entities. It is possible to speak of a European cultural identity without any reference to religious identification, such as Christian or Muslim. This relatively clear division between religion and culture

in personal or social identification, however, is often not found in other socio-cultural realities of the world. In many nations, religious affiliation is constitutive of one's own ethnic identity. It is precisely because of this richness in the different visions of the world that the dialogue conducted by the Church should not be undertaken only at inter-religious level, but also at the level of intercultural awareness.

Engaging in the mission of the Church necessarily involves engaging in forms of dialogue. Mission as proclamation of the Gospel involves communication, spiritual discernment, and conversion. This means having the patience and wisdom to learn the language and to understand the symbols and cultural dynamics that give meaning and identity to the person with whom you want to share faith in Jesus Christ. Action and commitment for justice and peace, for the poor and the marginalized, and for the integrity of creation necessarily require understanding the existential context of people, the cultural, social, and religious forms in which they live and by which they are molded or oppressed. The proclamation of the Gospel in dialogue can require forms of witness and liberation that bring Christians and adherents to other religions together.

A very important and influential text that collects these themes is a joint document produced in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, called *Dialogue and Proclamation*. It affirms both the significant elements of dialogue, especially inter-religious dialogue, and those of the Church's evangelizing mission, and at the same time studies the mutual relationship that binds them. This document highlights four forms of dialogue (see *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42) that can be considered complementary to and interactive with one another:

- a) the dialogue of life, where people strive to live in a spirit of openness and good neighborliness, sharing the joys and sorrows, problems and challenges of human life for better mutual understanding and respect;

- b) the dialogue of action, in which Christians and other believers collaborate for integral development, religious freedom, and the liberation of neighbor;
- c) the dialogue of theological exchange, where experts try to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, Sacred Scriptures, and traditions to appreciate one another's spiritual values;
- d) the dialogue of religious experience and prayer, in which people rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual riches of prayer, contemplation, faith, and the mystical paths in the search for God or the Absolute.

Pope Francis emphasizes that the primary dimension of dialogue, essential for Christian mission, is dialogue with God (see *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 29, 169). Our fundamental and life-giving encounter with the Absolute transforms us. For us Christians it consists in the encounter with the Lord Jesus, dead and risen, the God of love and holiness. It is through this encounter that our interior involvement with God in Christ, lived as spirituality, reveals itself as a true call to holiness through mission and dialogue. “We do not impose anything, we do not employ any subtle strategies for attracting believers; rather, we bear witness to what we believe and who we are with joy and simplicity” (Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, November 28, 2013).

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue is not reserved for specialists, but represents the commitment of the whole Church. “Guided by the Pope and their bishops, all local Churches, and all the members of these Churches, are called to dialogue” (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 43). The various members of the Church exercise different forms of dialogue – of life, of action, of theological exchange, of religious experience – according to their experience, responsibility in the Church, and their state of life. The purpose of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the Church's mission is not necessarily conversion to Christianity, but the conversion

of people to a better mutual understanding, to honest knowledge and mutual respect, to the service of peace, harmony, justice, reconciliation, and religious freedom. Nonetheless, members of other religions can freely decide to convert and embrace the Christian faith by entering the Church, when they are moved by the Holy Spirit and their conscience calls them to do so. Mutual trust and openness, based on religious freedom, are the basis for a commitment to authentic and fruitful dialogue.

“Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is ‘the way, and the truth and the life.’ The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people. Indeed Christ himself while expressly insisting on the need for faith and baptism, at the same time confirmed the need for the Church, into which people enter through Baptism as through a door. Dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 55).

October
2019